DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 380 UD 032 041

| | |
|---|---|
| TITLE | For Whom the Bell Tolls. The Institutionalization of Homeless Families in America. A Report of Homes for the Homeless. |
| INSTITUTION | Institute for Children and Poverty, New York, NY. |
| PUB DATE | 1997-03-00 |
| NOTE | 6p. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Evaluative (142) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Day Care; Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Attainment; Family Environment; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Homeless People; Job Skills; *Low Income Groups; Poverty; Social Problems; *Social Support Groups; Urban Problems; *Welfare Recipients; Welfare Services |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Institutional Practices; Welfare Reform |

ABSTRACT

This report addresses the failure of U.S. systems of support for homeless families, the impact of this failure on the nature of poverty across the country, and common sense options for turning failure into success. Extensive histories of participation in U.S. institutions of support are not spread evenly across the homeless population. While about 50% of those who are homeless and poor grew up in families that did not spend time on welfare, the other half grew up in families that relied on support institutions at least part of the time. The institutions were never designed for long-term improvement of family conditions, and they never provided guidance toward a quality education, adequate family counseling, or a job paying a living wage. Today's homeless parents have not "slipped through the cracks" of society. Instead, most have stagnated in a system ill-equipped to take the steps necessary to break the cycle of poverty and dependence. Reforms must move beyond attacking the symptom of long-term receipt of welfare to addressing the causes of welfare dependence--undereducation, lack of job skills, and unavailability of day care. Programs for the poor and homeless must focus not on dependence for today, but on independence for tomorrow. This means replacing make-work with job readiness, preventing child abuse and neglect through family preservation and education, and responding to homelessness with residential education and employment training centers. (Contains five figures and one table.) (SLD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 414 380

# For Whom The Bell Tolls.
# The Institutionalization of Homeless Families in America.
# A Report of Homes for the Homeless.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. Nunez
Inst for Children & Pov
Homes for the Homeless

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD032041

# For Whom The Bell Tolls

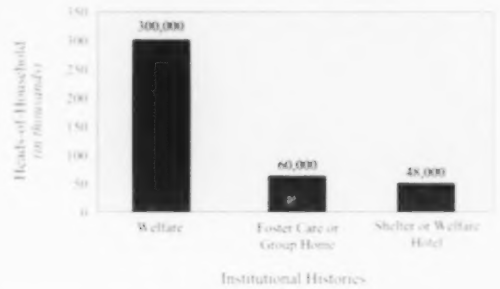
## The Institutionalization of Homeless Families in America

A peek through the doors of New York City's Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU) — the entryway into the City's family shelter system — presents a shocking snapshot of life for the poorest of America's welfare families — the homeless. Burgeoning with young single mothers and children sitting on floors and sleeping in chairs as they wait for someone to send them on to temporary shelter, the EAU offers a vivid example of the overburdened institutions* of support on which poor families depend daily.

This is only a snapshot, however; the reality of life for these families is even bleaker. Homeless families today are younger, less educated and poorer than those of even ten years ago. Most are headed by a single 20-year-old mother with one or two children under the age of six. Chances are, this young mother dropped out of school by the tenth grade, reads at the sixth grade level, and has never held a job for longer than six months.

Worse yet, if the entryway into America's institutions of support is jammed with families needing assistance, the exit is nowhere to be seen. Mounting evidence shows that for many homeless mothers, the visit to the EAU is merely the latest in a lifetime of institutional contact. Nearly fifty percent were introduced to America's institutions of support when they were children themselves. This long-term dependence indicates a serious and widespread failure among these institutions to serve as a doorway *out of* poverty rather than *into* "the system."† This report will address the failure of America's institutions of support, this failure's impact on the nature of poverty across the country, and common sense options for turning failure into success.

**Figure 1:**
**Homeless Heads-of-Household Today with Histories of Institutional Contact as Children**




*At least **fifty percent** of today's homeless parents spent time dependent on America's institutions of support when they were children themselves.*

## A History of Institutional Entrenchment

Widespread criticism of long-term dependence on public assistance has consistently focused on the number of years an adult spends on welfare. This limited debate, however, merely hints at the reality of lifetime dependence faced by the poorest of the poor. Fifty percent of heads-of-household who are homeless today grew up in families that spent time on welfare.[1] Sixteen percent spent time in foster care, group homes, shelters or welfare hotels before they turned eighteen.[2] (See Figure 1)

Such extensive histories of participation in America's institutions of support are not spread evenly across the homeless family population. Indeed, roughly fifty percent of homeless heads-of-household grew up in working poor families; while these families never received public assistance, their children — today's homeless parents — were notched down into dependence and homelessness by the stagnating economy, high unemployment, cuts in education and social services, and loss of low-income housing during the 1980s.[3]

The other half of today's homeless parents, however, were *not* notched down from the working poor, but instead spent their lives entrenched within our system of institutional support. Take the example of Maria. Maria spent her early childhood moving with her mother between overcrowded shared apart-

* "Institution" as it is used throughout this paper is defined as an agency, organization or program established to provide social or financial services — i.e. foster care, homeless shelters, and welfare.
† "System" as it is used throughout this paper is defined as the network of institutions in America that work to provide services to the poor.

UD032041

© March 1997, Institute for Children and Poverty

ments and welfare hotels. Though they received public assistance, the small family never had enough money to move into stable housing; nor did they have access to the education or job training that would enable Maria's mother to maintain steady employment. When Maria was ten, her mother descended into alcoholism and Maria was sent to live with foster parents. She moved on to a second foster family only a year later when a social worker found evidence of abuse. While this second family did not actively abuse Maria, it paid her little attention — so little, in fact, that by the tenth grade she was missing more than a third of the school year. At seventeen, Maria discovered she was pregnant. Kicked out by her foster family, and abandoned by the father of her child, Maria joined the ranks of the homeless. She gave birth while living in a shelter; *her daughter was born into the system.*

## A Lifetime of Dependence: Poor Preparation for Self-Sufficiency

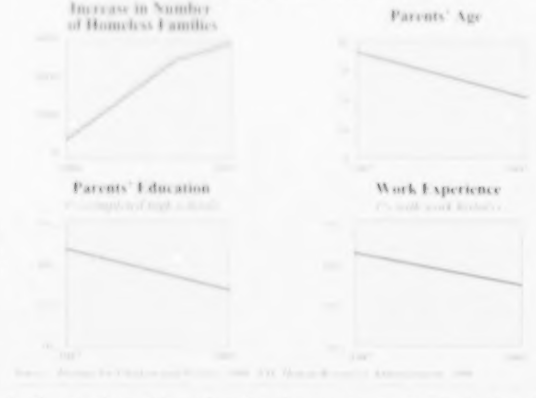
The extended relationship between America's system of social service institutions and families like Maria's indicates a serious failure to adequately address the needs of the country's poor, and especially its children. These structures — established to bridge the gaps when money is low, resources are scarce, and devastation is imminent — were initially intended to provide only temporary support. For many poor families, these institutions did provide the short-term support they needed to avoid falling into despair. Thousands of others, however, moved off of one institution's rolls only to reappear on another's a short time later.

Those thousands who were unable to regain stable footing in the early 1980s needed more than a bridge; they needed a ladder out of the constant turmoil of poverty. They lacked not just the money necessary to *survive*, but also the community support and options for change necessary to *live*. Like Maria, the children of these families — enmeshed in situations of neglect, often violence, despair and resigned dependence — saw few paths to success open for them. They needed not merely additional money, but a helping hand, a guiding voice and an open door. For lack of these, *yesterday's poor children are now today's homeless parents.*

At one time, community supports — schools, community organizations, and extended family — provided this assistance. However, over the last fifteen years each day has brought more news about the decay of our schools, the evaporation of family support, and the fear that is replacing kindness amongst our extended community. As a result, the institutions government funded in the 1960s to serve as a substitute safety net when community supports fell through found themselves in the 1980s responsible for meeting *all* of the vastly increased needs of America's poor families — as well as those needs of working poor families suddenly floundering within a weakened economy.

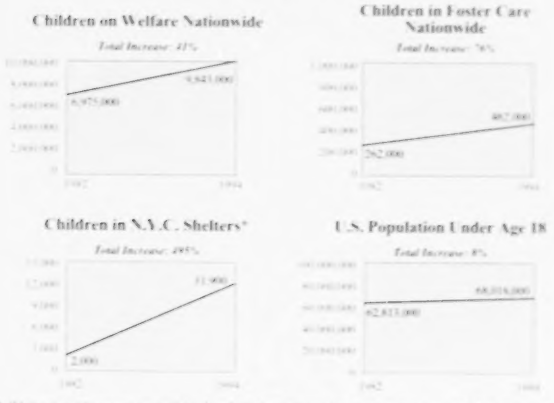
These institutions were neither established nor equipped to deal with problems on such magnitude or complexity. Caught between a structural myopia that focused on providing just enough food and shelter to help struggling families survive through the night and a public unwilling to make the commitment necessary to expand this narrow view, institutions of support found themselves watching family after family, child after child, walk away no worse but no better off than when they first sought assistance. While these families received enough money to survive for the moment, they never received the investment that would enable them to excel tomorrow. They never received guidance toward a quality education, adequate family counseling, or a job paying a living wage. They never learned to live independently. Instead, they learned to accept the instability, displacement, and dependence of poverty while in the institutions of foster care, shelters and welfare.

**Figure 2: Shifts in Homelessness and Homeless Families in New York City**




*As the number of homeless families continues to climb, the obstacles these families face in their pursuit of stability and independence are mounting: the average age, education and work experience among homeless parents have decreased steadily since 1987.*

**Figure 3: Change in the Youth Population**
***1982 - 1994***




* Many national figures are not available. New York City homeless data has been demonstrated to be reflective of homelessness across the country. Anecdotal reports of dramatic increases in the number of children in shelters across the country can be found in *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities* published annually by the U.S. Conference of Mayors since 1982.

*The growth in the numbers of America's children dependent on welfare, foster care and emergency shelters continues to outpace the growth of the general population in that age group. By 1994, over **460,000** children were in foster care, and nearly **10 million** were dependent on Welfare. Nearly **12,000** children were homeless in New York City alone.*

Today's homeless parents — the children of those families who sought help throughout the last fifteen years and never received it — now struggle with families of their own, unfamiliar with life independent of public support. Like Maria, they have descended further into poverty, and even into homelessness. In New York City alone, the number of homeless families grew by 500 percent between 1985 and 1995, reaching nearly 6000. At the same time, the average age, education and work experience among homeless parents decreased steadily.[4] (See Figure 2) Cities and rural areas across the country have seen similar trends. An estimated 400,000 families nationwide are now without homes and dependent on their local shelter system.[5] These are America's "poverty nomads", shuffling between shelters and temporary shared housing situations, always focused on where they will spend the night tomorrow, not on where they and their children will be a year — or fifteen years — from now.[6]

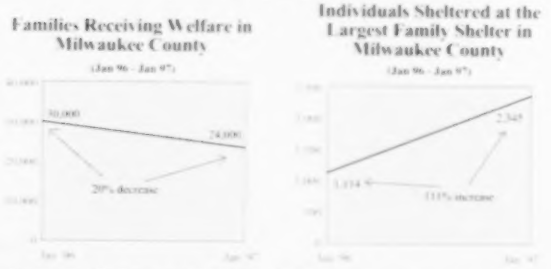
Today's homeless parents have not "slipped through the cracks" of society, out of view and out of reach of the institutions with the supposed power to help. On the contrary, they have never left these institutions' sight. Instead, they have stagnated in a system ill-equipped to take the radical steps necessary to break the cycle of poverty and dependence.

## What About The Future?

The despair we see today at family shelters around the country only hints at the devastation we will see tomorrow if no change is made in the *system*. As the number of families trapped in the system continues to rise, the number of children growing up dependent on *institutions* of support rises with it. (See Figure 3) If history continues to repeat itself, the children of today like Maria's daughter will pass the lessons of their youth — instability, dependence and hopelessness — onto their own children in the future. The result will be exponential growth in the number of dependent Americans. Ironically, this boom will be not only a product of institutional failure, but also an ongoing cause. Our institutions of support already are overwhelmed. The more overburdened they become, the less likely those needing help will be to receive the assistance they need — and the more likely they will be to return in the future.

Worse yet, rather than creating alternatives by addressing the *causes* of dependence — under-education, lack of job skills and unavailability of daycare — current reforms strike at the *symptom*: long-term receipt of welfare. The immediate results of such misguided reforms already are evident in cities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where reductions in the welfare rolls have not promoted independence but only sent the formerly dependent plummeting deeper into poverty: after only one year of heightened welfare participation restrictions, the largest family shelter in Milwaukee reported an increase of *111%* in the number of individuals sheltered each month. (See Figure 4)

**Figure 4: The Relationship Between Public Assistance Restrictions and Homelessness: The Milwaukee Story**




*The Pay for Performance (PFP) pilot welfare program went into effect in Milwaukee County in March of 1996. Over the following year, **6,000 families** lost their benefits under new restrictions, and another **4,020** had their benefits reduced. Jan House, the largest family shelter in Milwaukee, reported an increase of **111%** in the number of individuals sheltered, including those families referred by other overwhelmed shelters. The restrictions of PFP will soon apply to all recipients of welfare in Wisconsin under the state's new welfare plan, W-2.*



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

## Investing in the Future, Transforming Lives

By investing only in the short-term survival of families rather than their long-term independence, institutions of support ensure that those who come to them most in need will likely return. The result is not just continued dependence, but a descent further into poverty, and ultimately an increase in homelessness.

This cyclical poverty must be dealt with head on. Fifteen years of missed opportunities have resulted in today's homeless crisis. If we continue to pass up opportunities to make a difference, we can expect to see the children of today's homeless families knocking on our shelter doors within the next few years.

All programs for poor and homeless families must focus not on dependence today, but on *independence for tomorrow*. (See Table 1 below) This means replacing make-work with *job readiness*; preventing child abuse and neglect not with foster care or orphanages but with *family preservation and education*; and responding to the scourge of homelessness among welfare-dependent families not with welfare hotels or emergency shelters but with residential education/employment training centers, such as *Family Inns* and *Second-Chance Homes*.[9] (See Figure 5)

Since our institutions of support were first established, the landscape of poverty has changed. The current numbers are more vast, the need more intense, and the alternatives even more limited. It is time to respond to the tolling of this bell; the future of our nation, not simply its poor and homeless, depends upon it. Only through a commitment by every institution, every policymaker, and indeed the public at large will poor families like Maria's start down the path to self-sufficiency. Only then can we end the institutionalization of poor families in America and break the cycle of poverty and dependence.

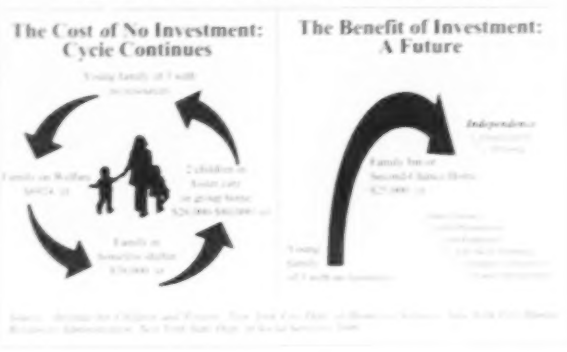
**Table 1: The Required Investments**

***Education*** ***may not be their only chance, but it's their best chance...***
- basic literacy
- GED preparation
- options for higher education

***Job Readiness*** ***comes before job training or placement***
- time management skills
- ability to take direction
- ability to respond to supervision
- on-the-job internship experience

***Life Skills*** ***are critical to crossing the threshold***
- parenting
- budgeting
- apartment maintenance
- healthcare and nutrition
- stress management
- ability to overcome domestic violence

**Figure 5:**
**The Costs and Benefits of Investing Today**




### Notes

1. From a survey conducted with 498 homeless family heads-of-household in New York City, June 1994.
2. From a survey conducted with 487 homeless family heads-of-household in New York City, June 1996.
3. R. Nunez, *An American Family Myth: Every Child at Risk* (New York: Homes for the Homeless, January 1995) p. 2; R. Nunez, *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Insight Books, 1996) pp. 9-18, 47.
4. New York City Human Resources Administration, 1996.
5. Institute for Children and Poverty, 1996; U.S. Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1996* (Washington D.C., December 1996).
6. For more on "poverty nomads," see Homes for the Homeless, *A Tale of Two Nations: The Creation of American "Poverty Nomads"* (New York: Homes for the Homeless, January 1996).
7. Administration for Children and Families, "AFDC Characteristics — 1994 — Table 16" (Washington D.C., 1997), http://www.acf.dhhs.gov; American Public Welfare Association, "Frequently Asked Questions" (Washington D.C., 1997), http://www.apwa.org; New York City Department of Homeless Services; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States 1995 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995) p. 15; U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, *1994 Green Book* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994) p. 395.
8. Joy House, Milwaukee, WI, February 1997; Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Madison, WI, February 1997.
9. The "Family Inn" standard of transitional housing for homeless families integrates on-site education, job readiness training and support services for homeless parents and children within a residential environment. See Nunez, *The New Poverty*, 1996. "Second-Chance Homes" are multi-service residential facilities that incorporate the Family Inn standard to prepare teen mothers to live independently. See K. Sylvester, *Second-Chance Homes: Breaking the Cycle of Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, June 1995).

**Homes for the Homeless** (HFH) is the largest operator of *American Family Inns* — residential educational/employment training centers — for homeless families in New York City. The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is HFH's research and training division. Homes for the Homeless' facilities include:

*Clinton Family Inn* (New York, NY) · *Prospect Family Inn* (Bronx, NY)
*Island Family Inn* (Staten Island, NY) · *Saratoga Family Inn* (Queens, NY)

*Clinton Family Crisis Nursery*
*Prospect Family Crisis Nursery*
*Saratoga Family Crisis Nursery*
*Camp Kiwago & Lamova* (Harriman State Park, NY)

**Homes for the Homeless**
36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor • New York, NY 10003
phone (212) 529-5252 • fax (212) 529-7698
hfh40611@handsnet.org • http://www.opendoor.com/hfh

Ralph Nunez, *President/CEO* — Leonard N. Stern, *Founder*



BEST COPY AVAILABLE